

## TEACHING LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE

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### Abstract

*While literature-based instruction has been highly praised for its pedagogical benefits, it on fronts entrenched learning hindrances, both linguistic and cultural in EFL settings. Whether the literature instruction in practice is motivating or demotivating is an issue worthy of concern. In this article the writer surveys attitudes to the integration of language and literature teaching, noting the reservations that have been expressed about it in the past, and which still continue to linger in some quarters..This paper interrogates the role of literature in the language classroom, communicative approaches and emphasis on practical functions of English language. During the 1980`s there was a comeback of interest in literature and language teaching. Linguistics and other contributors suggested that literature should be involved in classes of English for non-native learners but in another pedagogical approach..."the teaching of literature is an arid business unless there is a response, and even negative responses can create an interesting classroom situation"(Long, 1987). The revival of literature is characterized as "literature wearing different clothing." What kind of literature to use? Texts should be chosen according to students' needs, interests, cultural background, and language level. Selected books must be relevant to the life experiences, emotions, or dreams of learners. This paper suggests choosing a work that is not much above the student's reading proficiency." Interest, appeal, and relevance are all more important."*

**Keywords:** language, literature, pedagogical approaches, non-native learners.

### Introduction

Language through literature is a subject that has been discussed among academicians for quite some time. Over the past few decades, there has been much discussion on the value of attempting to teach any kind of literature, whether it be the classics or any imaginative work written in English, as part of an English language syllabus must be taught literature and it must be taught by creating an awareness of linguistic possibilities and sensibility. Literature functions as a mirror that reflects the abounding and amazing diversities (Lazar, 1993) of life, belief systems, values, behaviors (Joseph, et al., 2000), history, and culture presented in language (Bruner, 1996). Reading literary texts encourages learners to grow with sharp, discerning sensibility to the

events, whether social, political, or historical, which construct the background to a particular literary text (Lazar, 1993). It is absolutely not only the new lexicon and grammatical rules that make a learner alien to a language, but also the divergent culture rules embedded in the language. Language is also a reflection of culture so that understanding the cultural content of what one learns is a crucial factor in reading comprehension (Lono, 1987; Nelson, 1987). Differentiation in learners' attitudes, motivation, cultural background, and even learning skills influences teachers' preparation and work that should be covered in lessons. For the English language teachers the difference in the level of English amongst children in any one class is even more remarkable. Many teachers still think that literature cannot be used in English classes because it is

thought to be too difficult for pupils but they do not think about the variety of work and many ways of using stories in ELT. It is in this context that the idea of literature through language becomes relevant. Among language educators, there has been a hot debate as to how, when, where, and why literature should be incorporated in ESL/EFL curriculum. Vigorous discussion of how literature and ESL/EFL instruction can work together and interact for the benefit of students and teachers has led to the flourishing of interesting ideas, learning and improved instruction for all. Arguments against the use of literature in EFL classrooms hold that literature can contribute little to language learning due to the special nature of literary texts (McKay, 1982). It follows that intrinsic hindrances lie ahead for ESL students, let alone EFL students, to read literary works, such as linguistic intricacies of the target language, especially lexical and semantic barriers, unfamiliarity with or remoteness of the cultural background (Lazar, 1993; Taglieber, Johnson, & Yarbrough, 1988), lack of an overview of Western literature, failure to comprehend overall meaning and an insensitivity to literary works (Hsieh, 2003). Similarly, there are rhetorical and literary devices in texts, such as complex metaphors, which students might find difficult to unravel. An additional issue is that more often than not literary language might be so markedly "deviant" that it breaks the usual norms of language use, as observed by Leech (1973) (quoted in Lazar, 1994, p. 115). Besides, given that there is a distinction between literary and linguistic activities, the learning of literature cannot facilitate the learning of communicative skills, which are the main goals of language learning (Littlewood, 1986). Complaints about the inclusion of literature in language instruction are often heard, based on the grounds that the language of literature, is "ungradeable and linguistically unsuitable," thus, irrelevant to learners' needs (Hill, 1986, p. 10).

Teaching and learning literature through language demands active involvement of both the teacher and the taught in bringing the literary text to life. A linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unconvertant with linguistic methods, are equally flagrant anachronisms. I imagined how it would be like to study literature alone. This would be tough especially if English is not your first language. Just tough. The aim here is to examine topics at the 'interface' of language studies and literary criticism and in doing so to build bridges between these traditionally divided disciplines (Simpson, 1997: ii).

From the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'English literature' was designated a much broader scope as an educational subject, including not only poetry and fiction, but also history, biography, scientific, didactic and expository writing. The literature class consisted often of an enthusiastic teacher – orator and passive students being "too busy writing in translations of unfamiliar words to respond to the text" (Long, 1987). Literature was supposed to be a static kind of language and that was why modern linguistics (appreciating more spoken language) distrusts a written form of English language. Besides, they found literature as "an undesirable freight of cultural connotations." (Collie, Slater, 1987). Literature was not treated as a distinct subject; rather its study was woven into the teaching of classical rhetoric which was then aimed at enhancing in learners the skills of discovery and communication (Spack, 1985). What this auspicious historical point bears is that current beliefs as to the potential of literature for fostering 'communicative competence' in language learners have a long history to them. However, it needs to be admitted that not all aspects of 'communication' as conceptualized today were attended to at that time. However, the swinging of the pendulum which has always characterized the field of language

teaching did not leave attitudes toward using literature in L1/EFL/ESL untouched. In parallel with the 19th century's surge of concern with comprehension rather than production in English and literature's studies, which were then indistinguishable, communication gave way to formal correctness as a prime goal to be achieved in the field of rhetoric (ibid.). Induced by both socioeconomic and pedagogical concerns, this shift of emphasis to grammatical instruction and error correction was probably the first ominous sign to herald the controversial position of literature in language teaching. It led literary scholars to avoid dancing attendance to rhetoricians and to run their own reader-centered literary criticism courses, giving literature its deserved scope as poetry, drama and fiction.

Literature can be used in classes of English according to the age, the language level, the cultural background, and the tastes and interests of the learners. There is an overall evolution in the relationship between literature and language teaching and learning. Evidently, the relationship between the two related but distinct areas have gone through considerable transformations (Delanoy, 1997). At the beginning, under the influence of the Formalists and the Structuralists, much attention was given to the use of literature in language teaching. According to Thakur (2003), before the world war, the teaching of the English language was synonymous with the teaching of literature. It was treated as a source of high moral value and a model of excellent language use that emphasized on the study of literary canon of the target language. In this situation, literature was taught as the body of knowledge or the subject matter that dominated the language syllabus (Carroli, 2002). The situation however, changed after the British colonization period ended (Thakur, 2003). This was due the fact that the status of the English language in many of the colonized countries changed to become a second or a foreign language.

As a result of the change of the English language status, literature which was once treated as a source of high moral value no longer held its special status. Meanwhile, literature became more divorced from language teaching when advocates of the Functional Approach argued to eliminate literature from language teaching (Delanoy, 1997). They disputed that the use of literature in language teaching was a long way from meeting the needs of the language learners. The trend to disengage and at the same time to unite literature with language teaching and learning continued when the Communicative Approach to language teaching was established in the 1970s. Although initially through the Communicative language teaching method, authentic literary texts were regarded to supply learners with 'representational uses of the language' (Carter, 2007: 6), many materials and textbooks that are designed using the method focused on specific language features and functions minimally make use of the authenticity of literary language in the teaching and learning of a language (Liddicoat & Crozet, 2000; Newman & Pujol, 1996)

Literature is not qualitatively different from any other linguistic performance. It is an instance of the productive use of a limited number of linguistic structures in order to achieve communication. It is only when we consider stylistic variety that the differences appear. However, the notion of literature through language may raise a few eyebrows. Many universities around the globe offer a number of literature courses as part of the undergraduate program. Teachers who teach these courses often use the traditional method of lecturing on topics like theme, characterization, plot, motifs etc directly without giving any emphasis on the stylistic/linguistic aspect of the literary texts that they teach. Of course, students Language teaching is

a process whose aim changes not only from country to country and culture to culture but from individual to individual. As seen using literary texts in language teaching is a new innovation, but teaching a foreign language only by using literary passages cannot, of course, be so useful. Literature is a science using, as every science does, language as a tool, making use of literary texts in teaching foreign languages it has been one of the methods to be applied since the ancient times. It is difficult to supply a watertight definition of the term "literature" but what can be asserted is that literature is not the name of a simple, straight-forward phenomenon, but an umbrella term which covers a wide range of activities. However, when it becomes a subject of study, it may be seen as an activity involving and using language. The claim "the study of literature is fundamentally a study of language in operation" (Widdowson: 1971) is based on the realisation that literature is an example of language in use, and is a context for language use. Thus, studying the language of literary texts as language in operation is seen as enhancing the learner's appreciation of aspects of the different systems of language organization.

### **Literature in language teaching**

Literature is not usually discussed as a coherent branch of the curriculum in relation to language development either mother-tongue or foreign language teaching. The three most common counterarguments regarding the payoffs of using literature in the language classroom are:

1. Literature's structural complexity and unique and sometimes nonstandard use of language preclude the teaching of grammar which is one of the main goals of language teachers. This point is also recapitulated by Savvidou (2004) who states that "the creative use of language in poetry and prose often deviates from the conventions and rules which govern standard, non-literary discourse..."
2. Literature has nothing to offer to EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses where the focus is on meeting the students' academic and professional goals.
3. Literature is highly culturally charged, hence its conceptual difficulty and its hindrance, rather than facilitation, of learning the target language.

However, classroom development cannot proceed before key theoretical and practical issues are identified and deliberated. Practical criticism shares two main presuppositions with the discipline of stylistics: first literary text is made from language and its primary focus for analysis will be the patterns made by language. The second, presupposition is that practical criticism is opposed to belletristic or aestheticism waffle about literary texts and attempts to locate intuitive responses to the meanings and effects released by the text in the structure of the language used. The attitude that literature is irrelevant to language teaching was succinctly and forcefully summed up by Blatchford (1972:1, 6) thirty years ago. He rejects the study of English literature as "a luxury that cannot be indulged", an "expensive gew-gaw". It is far more important, he insists, that students be given every opportunity to develop communication skills. Blatchford does qualify these sweeping statements with an acknowledgement that they might not hold true in all situations, such as where English is taught as a second, rather than a foreign, language. His stance, nevertheless, seems to have been representative of a pervasive attitude to literature among writers and practitioners in the field of language teaching at that time. For example, Arthur (1968:199), writing a few years earlier, acknowledges the reluctance of language teachers to include literature in the syllabus, and Allen (1976:17) notes

the deep division between linguistics and literature. However, there were, at the same time, also voices claiming a place for literature in the language classroom. Marckwardt (1978:19), for example, argues that there is "a justifiable and a profitable place for literature" in ESL, adding that "the place and the purpose of a literary component within the English curriculum will differ with the place and the purpose of teaching English". Crucially, for non-native speakers, how much of the text do we have to understand linguistically before reading gives rise to productive responses and intuitions? It is important to keep an open mind about these under-investigated issues.

It has remained a contentious issue, however. Increasingly, linguists and linguistic critics are addressing themselves to questions such as: is there a language of literature? And what is literary language? Even in more recent years, nearly all writers advocating the use of literature in ESL/EFL preface their discussion with an acknowledgement of a widely held belief that literature does *not* have a place in language pedagogy. When they say this, they mean they find it difficult to isolate any single or special property of language which is exclusive to a literary work. They then implicitly defend themselves against anticipated objections by pointing to recent changes in thinking. As recently as 2000, Bates (2000:13) felt it necessary to argue that poetry is not, as is often supposed, completely removed from learning or teaching a language: In fact poetry can handle all kinds of experience connected with EFL and irradiate the experience, providing thought or comic relief, making the experience more real, and perhaps making the language learning more creative. Nevertheless, in spite of lingering reservations, there has been an increased interest in using literature in language teaching in recent years. McRae, himself a prolific contributor to the field, announces that literature "has made a widely heralded comeback", and goes on to offer an

analysis of the "buzzwords" that have inevitably accompanied its reappearance in EFL pedagogy (McRae, 1991:432). Lazar (1994:115) also comments on the growth of interest in the previous decade.

The world of discussion and debate, parliamentary, journalist, academic or otherwise, is impregnated with metaphors which regularly compare argument to the conduct of a battle. Publications since then indicate that the interest in literature has continued – as has the debate about its relevance and application. Paran (1998:6) welcomes the "comeback" of literature, while at the same time pointing out that most ESL teachers are not well trained to teach literature. Both scholarly and professional publications have explored the theoretical and practical possibilities of literature in the language classroom; a number of course books and teacher training manuals have appeared, giving concrete expression to these ideas.

### 3. Language in literary studies

Literature in English is hardly ever entirely in English. Contact with other languages takes place, for example, whenever foreign languages are introduced, or if a native style is self-consciously developed, or when aspects of English are remade in the image of another language. But the initiative for integration has not only come from the language classroom. Various factors in recent years have undermined the position of literature as an area of language use divorced from others. The privileged status traditionally given to literary texts in the study of a language has increasingly been replaced with a more utilitarian bias which favours language for its instrumental benefits – now the very inclusion of literature in the syllabus is a matter of debate. This process has certainly been evident in the changing face of English studies at South African universities. Combrink (1996:3), in describing innovations to the English

programme at Potchefstroom University, sketches in the following brief background to the changes: English departments in South Africa have traditionally been departments of English literature (firmly along the lines of the Oxbridge model), with the lang/lit divide providing grounds for at times acrimonious debate. In the past decade and a half, however, it has increasingly become imperative to address the teaching of students at tertiary level in a way at once more 'practical' and 'relevant' without relinquishing the perceived benefits of a 'liberal' education.

"Practicality" and "relevance" have been interpreted in various ways. For some it has simply meant an opening out of the literary canon to include texts previously excluded. Another response has been to argue for an equal place for language study in the curriculum. Pereira (1990:114), reviewing the proceedings of the Conference on English at Tertiary Level in 1989, a forum in which issues such as these were discussed, draws special attention to the language/literature debate, emphasising the need for a change from the traditional "Oxbridge" model: If one point has emerged with crystal clarity, it is that Departments of English can no longer ignore the need to involve themselves in language teaching. It is not merely a responsibility, it is becoming a matter of survival. Too often, in university systems all over the world, literature study is not related to language learning; one is considered something of a superior discipline, the other an inferior exercise often entrusted to lower-level personnel.

### **The Place of Literature in EFL**

Teaching English through literature has become the fashionable phenomenon. It has remained a contentious issue, however. Even in more recent years, nearly all writers advocating the use of literature in ESL/EFL preface their discussion with an acknowledgement of a widely held belief

that literature does *not* have a place in language pedagogy. They then implicitly defend themselves against anticipated objections by pointing to recent changes in thinking. However, the teaching is to feed student heavy, repetitive and somewhat redundant literature, which has little or no relevance to his immediate problems. This affords little opportunity for creativity. The student is told of literary terms and the meaning of words, and is finally asked to analyze the subject of literary piece, which is often too abstract a task for the non-native speaker. The process of analysis, therefore, takes the form of repeating the material understanding mostly by memorization and at best, partly by rephrasing.

Students at the intermediate level become frustrated by being able partially to understand but unable to respond. I believe this frustration is the by-product of non-involvement; the students are static participants in a one-sided process. A technique called "Simple Story-Telling" may be used for improving the students' oral English. One of the shortcomings of that method is that in the discussion the students invariably simply repeat the story. Another problem inherent in such a method is that the reading and repeating of random stories with no contextual relevance to the students' individual interests leads to their only learning words and memorizing patterns. Similarly in the language laboratory, insipid and unimaginative pattern drills produce boredom and lower the efficiency of students who are beyond the level of learning basic English. Although literature once played a significant role in language study, its prominence faded as linguistics became the focal point of language programs (Widdowson, 1982). Linguistics such as Topping (1968) argue that literature should be excluded from the foreign language curriculum because of its structural complexity, lack of conformity to standard grammatical rules, and remote

control perspective. In other words, these linguists believe that literature does not remote control perspective. In other words, these linguists believe that literature does not contribute to foreign language students' practical goal of achieving linguistic proficiency. Numerous teachers now believe that the heritage, whose fosters habits of "seeing proficiency. Numerous teachers now believe that the heritage, whose fosters habits of "seeing feelingly on the one hand, and skeptically rationally on the other" (Oster, 1985; 75), should not be denied to foreign language students who are intellectually and emotionally, if not linguistically and culturally, ready to examine literary works. According to Povey (1967), the linguistic difficulty of literature has been overstated; readers do not need to experience total comprehension to gain something from a text. In fact, literature, with its extensive and connotative vocabulary and its complex syntax can expand all language skills (Povey, 1967). Likewise the 'cultural benefits of studying literature are hard to ignore, since literature mirrors national culture (Harris and Harris 1967a, 1967b.) and can therefore acquaint students with the aesthetic moral and spiritual values of the nation and the rules of the social system (C. Scott 1965, Adeyanju, 1978). Widdowson suggests that rather than limiting the focus of literary study to either language usage or cultural content, we should view literature as discourse and the study.

Teaching Foreign Language Literature to non-native-speaking university students is not always an easy task. In some cases, it is itself a situation taken from the absurd, in which the students are supposed to read books in a language they hardly understand and then they discuss structure, the author's style etc. Under such circumstances, it may be absurd to believe that the students are learning anything of significance.

The idea of using plays may come as response to this situation. To have the students deal with originals in a first

course, use the language creatively improve their language level, loose themselves from the claws of the dictionary respond positively to the subject and learn some literature. In addition contemporary literature has been considered most appropriate at initial stages (Marckwardt, 1981; 3). It will be very difficult for students to approach Chaucer or Shakespeare if they are terrified of literature and consider it a dragon keeping them from graduation.

### **Conclusion**

Nevertheless, in spite of lingering reservations, there has been an increased interest in using literature in language teaching in recent years. McRae, himself a prolific contributor to the field, announces that literature "has made a widely heralded comeback", and goes on to offer an analysis of the "buzzwords" that have inevitably accompanied its reappearance in EFL pedagogy (McRae, 1991:432). Using literature in the language classroom" is a concept that has its focal point in language development. Thus, any syllabus based on this concept should also maintain language as the central concern. For this, it is imperative that curriculum developers depart from the traditional view attached to literature. It is upon EFL/ESL materials developers, syllabus designers and teachers to determine their stance. They may select the most appropriate approach or combination of approaches, design activities and tasks and make the most out of literature to enhance language learning and teaching by analyzing the idiosyncratic features of the classroom, educational system and culture in which they will be used. It is also equally important that the syllabus has suggestions for teaching strategies and forms of assessment. The objectives may outline the importance of literature towards language development, but they become redundant if the teaching and assessment techniques do not apply those objectives practically.

Literature generates creativity in language and imagination and should feature in any education system that regards discovery and enjoyment as essential components of the learning process.

In short, development in modern literary theories, the relationship between literature and language teaching and learning, and also the evolution of literature instruction within the area of education in general have indeed affected the way literature is explicated and also taught. Since the present scenario has shown favorable attention in the incorporation of literature across curricula, more research efforts that lead to the discoveries and understanding of practices as well as real challenges in the teaching of literature would enhance future pedagogical development within the literature instruction.

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